



Confucian Agency in the Visual Integration of the Three Teachings during the Late Ming

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the perspectives and roles of the literati in the movement for the integration of the three teachings during the mid-to-late Ming period (1368-1644), utilizing a series of images as a basis for analysis. Initially, it analysed two types of images, 'The Three Teachings' (三教圖) images and 'Three Laughters at Tiger Gorge' (虎溪三笑圖), to clarify the attitudes and practices of literati towards the three doctrines before the Ming 明 dynasty. Subsequently, it also examines the transformation of literati attitudes toward three doctrines in the mid-to-late Ming period, particularly in relation to the popularity of these images. Moreover, the exploration of three teachings-themed woodblock prints and the reasons for their emergence provides a more convincing view of literati attitudes than research on paper images, as the wide participation of literati gradually emerged in the mid-to-late Ming. This research is dedicated to exploring the role of the literati in the development of the integration of the three teachings and reveals how the factors influencing social mobility and their impact on society evolved during the mid-and late Ming era.

1. Introduction

Integrating the three teachings, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, is a significant philosophical concept that emerged during the Three Kingdoms (220-280) period (Shi, Tang Dynasty, Volume 1) and became a widespread sustained consensus in society. This theory profoundly impacted the development of traditional Chinese philosophy and social structure¹. Historians and philosophers have thus discussed it in depth². The three teachings-themed image emerged around the late Tang 唐 (618-907) and Five Dynasties 五代 (907-979) period. But only Ma Yuan's 馬遠 (1160-1225) paintings have had a detailed record up until the present, which has provided information on the original arrangement of the three teachings' status. In comparison to previous images, three teaching-themed images gained greater popularity among the literati class during the mid and late Ming era. Consequently, the number of these teaching-themed images in the Ming period constituted more than half of all recorded images. In addition, it became a popular image among literati that many literati

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¹ Feng Youlan (1983), 'A Short History of Chinese Philosophy 中國哲學簡史', described how ancient Chinese philosophy consisted mainly of Confucianism, Taoism, Chinese Buddhism.

² Liu Xiaodong's (2002) essay discussed the development of the integration of the three teachings in the late Ming in the philosophical field through text analysis; the image analysis in this dissertation is developed based on this essay.

artists, such as Ding Yunpeng 丁雲鵬 (1547- c.1628) and Chen Hongshou 陳洪綬 (1598-1652), created the images for them, instead of only for the court.

These themes of images had been focused on by some scholars previously. Nelson (2002) revealed the derivative painting, 'Three Laughers,' and analyzed their connection and development, while the relevant paintings, 'The Three Teachings' images were missed. Li Song (2008) initially clarified the shape and transformation of 'Three Laughers at Tiger Gorge' was originated from another theme of painting 'Image of Lotus Society' (蓮社圖), which contributed to approach the developing process of the image of three doctrines theme in the society, while the difference between 'Image of three teachings' and 'Image of Three laughers' was ignored which should be further explored; Yu Youxian (2011) discussed the phenomenon of integration of three teachings based on the analysis of a three teachings scroll paintings created by Ding Yunpeng, which discussed Ding, who as a literati artist, his attitude toward the popular of three teachings at that time, inspired this study to focus on the research about the participant of literati in the three doctrines movement and their authentic attitude toward the integration of three doctrines, and Yu was left out to analyze a woodblock print of 'Image of Three Teachings' created by Ding Yunpeng for the ink business. It, in fact, was significant to reflect the communication between the literati and the so-called lower class, the participation of the literati in commercial activity, and the folk life.

Currently, Li Yutong (2023) has focused on the development of the image of three teachings in the Ming dynasty, analyzing the relevant paintings created by the royal court and the literati class; moreover, the propagation path of this motif from the court to the folk. It contributes to analyzing the different participants from every stratum on the same topic; even though the logic behind this phenomenon was ignored, the consensus about the requirement and encouragement of the integration of three doctrines for every class, and the integration of not only the three teachings but also all social strata at that time. As the intermediary layer between the ruling class and the general populace, how does the intellectual class fulfill its role as a cohesive force within society? What are the distinctive attitudes and practices of the literati, and in what ways do the other two strata influence them?

Thus, the above questions urge this study to focus on the exploration of the practices of literati towards the integration of three doctrines and their connection between the high class and the public. This essay explores the conception of the three teachings of the literati through these mid and late Ming images. It arranges the development of, and differences in this theme for images throughout history, firstly to show the original conflicts associated with the three teachings and changes during the Ming period. Furthermore, expanding the objects under investigation to include both 'The Three Teachings' images and 'Three Laughers at Tiger Gorge' provides a more comprehensive study. This essay is innovative in analysing the paper-based paintings and the images in the woodblock manual, revealing a social motivation behind the class mobility between the literati and the lower public class. Moreover, conclusions can be drawn about the literati's attitudes from a series of individual cases in relation to a general class analysis. Overall, this essay compensates for the shortage in previous studies of the conception of combining the three teachings creatively through image resources, and exposes the opinion of the literati class about this conception, which will benefit other researchers aiming to study the class significance and value of the three teachings.

2. The prevalence and transformation of three teachings-themed images

What factors may have contributed to the emergence of the theme of the three teachings throughout history? According to the monk, (Shi) Daxin 釋大訢(1284-1344), the three teachings-themed image contributed toward expressing the confluence of the three teachings (The Commercial Press Taiwan, 1986, Volume 585, p.21). This theme of image emergence is undoubtedly related to the prevalent idea of integrating the three teachings.

The three teachings-themed image had emerged in the late Tang and the Five Dynasties period, when this theme was also presented in two types of image, 'The Three Teachings' (三教圖)³ and 'The Three Laughers' images (三笑圖)⁴. These were two similar and relevant images from the beginning. The 'Three Laughers at Tiger Gorge' exhibited in the National Palace Museum and a detailed record of Ma Yuan's three teachings-themed paintings are the only reliable image and text that provide information about the original layout of the paintings. These are helpful for exploring the developments of these images and the literati's conception of the teachings in earlier periods.

According to Zhou Mi's 周密 (1232-c.1298) record, Ma Yuan, a court painter during the Song Lizong 宋理宗 period (1205-1264), was ordered by the eunuch to create a Three Teachings image with Buddha sitting in the middle, with Laozi 老子(c.571-470) at his side, and Confucius 孔子 (551B.C.-479B.C.) bowing with his hand in front of them (Zhou, Song Dynasty, Volume 12). The Buddha seems to be most respected. However, Zhou continued to write that Jiang Ziyuan 江子遠 (unknown), a trusted officer of Lizong, wrote an inscription for this painting at Lizong's command, which re-worked the original intention of this painting, describing 'Buddha sitting in the Middle place, Laozi standing beside him and looking awry, and Confucius only laughs and flings himself on the floor', which received the emperor's appreciation (Ibid).

Scholar An and Liu (2007) analysed this narrative from the perspectives of the emperor, Jiang, and Zhou, and concluded that both the Southern Song authority (1127-1279) and literati supported the coexistence of the three. It is convincing that the emperor was the dominant supporter of the coexistence of the three teachings and had tremendous respect for Buddhism. As Zhou explained, this painting was

³ 'The Three Teachings' image that existed in the Ming Dynasty was created by Ding Yunpeng (1547-1628), collected in the Beijing Palace Museum, and Chen Hongshou's (1599-1652) painting in Wu Xi Museum. Both paintings present the founders of the three teachings: Buddha, Confucius, and Laozi.

⁴ 'Three Laughers at Tiger Gorge' always illustrates a historical fiction of a monk Huiyuan 慧遠(334A.D.-416A.D.), who lived in seclusion to study Buddhism and promised that he would never interfere with the secular world. It is depicted through the Tiger Brook and a bridge, which form a boundary line with his place of seclusion. Huiyuan broke his rule at a time when he saw guests, the scholar Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (365A.D.-427A.D.) and the Taoist Lu Xiuqing 陸修靜 (406A.D.-477A.D.), and crossed the bridge (Chen Song Dynasty, Volume 2). This story symbolized the communication and integration of the three teachings. It was popular in the Ming literati class and is illustrated based on a story that presents Tao, Lu, and Huiyuan as the representatives of three doctrines.

created following the eunuch’s order. However, the Song 宋 (960-1279) court eunuch did not have the tremendous power of eunuchs in other periods, and was supervised by an official civilian group and controlled by the emperor (Zhu 2016, p.18). Most of them were educated and communicated with the literati (Cheng 2019, p.47). Confucianism was the mainstream doctrine in the Long period (An & Liu 2007, p.53), and the eunuch was unlikely to order Ma to paint something without being instructed to do so. To some extent, eunuchs were a shadow representing the emperor’s will. Thus, the design of this painting was commissioned by the authority, i.e. the emperor, as opposed to the eunuch. Zhou defended the emperor's conduct by attributing the incident to the eunuch and subsequently constructing a portrayal of the emperor as aligned with Confucian principles, revealing Zhou’s perspective as that of a scholar critical of the prevailing status of the three teachings. In addition, the existing Southern Song 南宋 (1127-1279) image ‘Three Laughters at Tiger Gorge’ (Fig. 1) depicted the monk Huiyuan in a red robe in the middle of the three figures, bestowing the greatest respect on Buddhism among the three doctrines represented. If this is an original work by Li Tang 李唐 (1066 -1150), who was a court painter in the Southern Song period, the court’s support for the coexistence of the three teachings is reconfirmed.

The three teachings-themed image gained popularity during the Ming Dynasty, particularly in the mid-and late Ming era. This can be proven through various accounts, from the late Tang to the Ming period, from relevant compositions about the three teachings, as seen in the charts below:

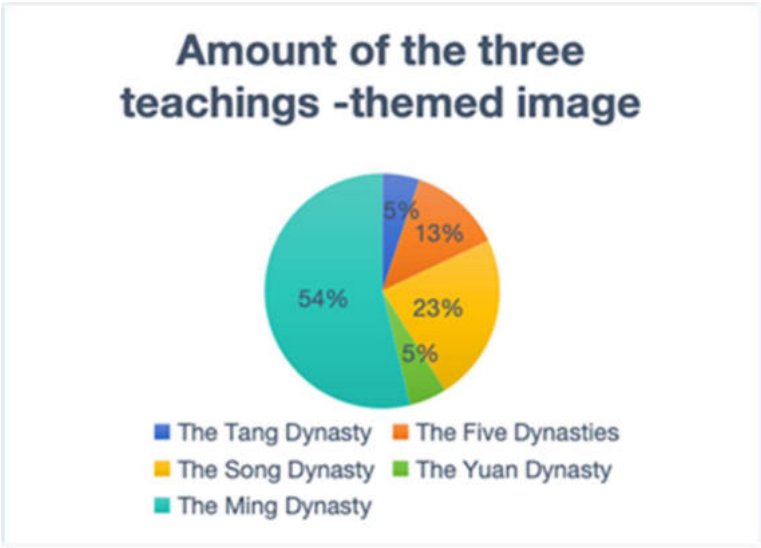


Chart 1. Amounts of three teachings-themed images.[Source of chart: the author]

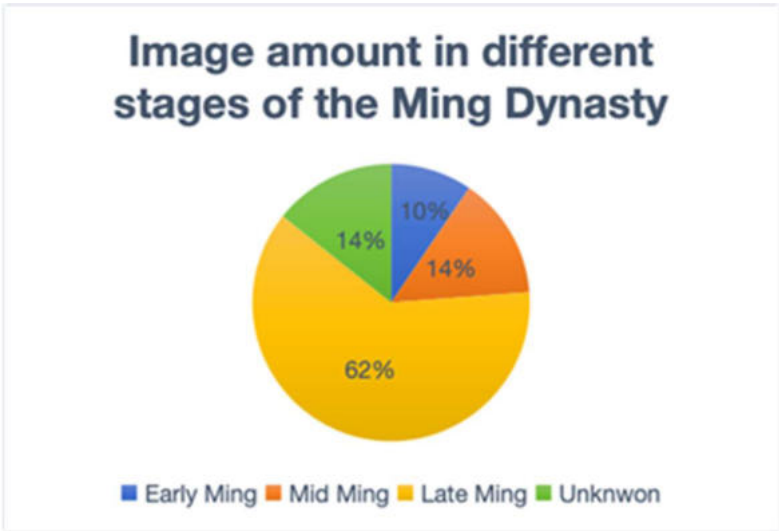


Chart 2. Amounts of images in different stages of the Ming Dynasty.[Source of chart: the author]

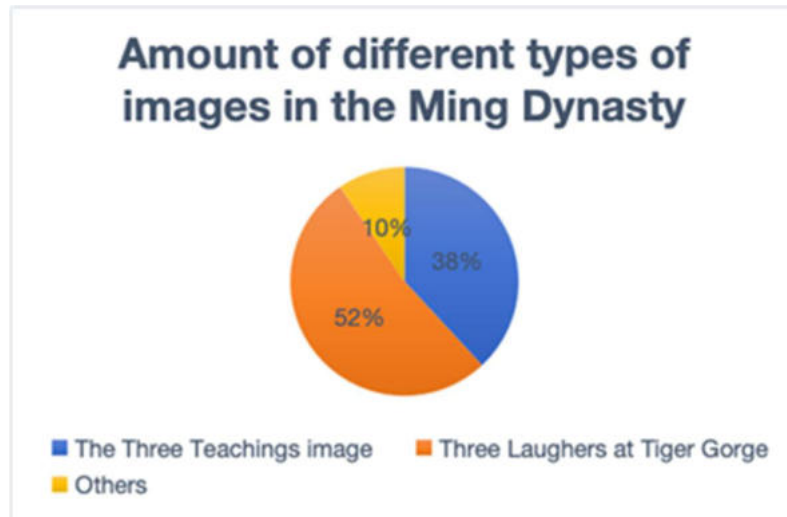


Chart 3. Amounts of images in different stages of the Ming Dynasty. [Source of chart: the author]

The above charts indicate that more than half of the images depicting the three teachings belong to the Ming period. The popular types of painting at that time were: ‘The Three Teachings’ images, ‘*Three Laughers at Tiger Gorge*,’ and a unique one named ‘*A Harmonious Picture* (一團和氣圖)’ (Fig. 2), created by the Ming emperor Zhu Jianshen 朱見深 (1447-1487). This shows the representatives of the three teachings in a combined form, implying the maturity that had developed in integrating the three teachings and revealing the ruler’s positive attitude toward this. In addition, these images are mainly concentrated in the mid-and late Ming periods, particularly in the late Ming, which accounts for 62% of the total. The differences in the data can be related to the development of the theory that the idea of integrating the three teachings advanced and became widespread after support from Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472-1529) (He 2007, p.120), who was active during the mid-Ming, when the prevalence of images with this theme began to surge. Moreover, the ‘*Three Laughers at Tiger Gorge*’ painting accounts for more images than ‘The Three Teachings’ images, which was perhaps because of greater literati participation than at other times. The more casual style of ‘*Three Laughers at Tiger Gorge*’ was more suited to the literati demand for comfort and individuality than the solemn and religious three teachings-themed images.

It is worth noting that most artists of the three teachings-themed images were connected closely to the literati that were profoundly impacted by the literati aesthetic, such as Ding Yunpeng and Guo Xu 郭翽 (1456-1532). Even literati had passed the imperial examination. Therefore, these artists impacted the development of the three teachings-themed images with their literati concepts.

On the other hand, artists Ding and Guo, along with a subsequent painter, Chen Hongshou, possessed experience as royal painters within the imperial court. Their interest in creating images themed around the three teachings may have been influenced by the court’s beliefs stemming from their prior experiences. Notably, Ding’s scroll painting (Fig.3) depicting the three teachings exhibits an intensive religious style while simultaneously incorporating elements of literati aesthetics through a reduction in color saturation⁵. This subtle detail reflects how high-class fashion permeated into lower social strata. Furthermore, it is essential to examine both the function and self-orientation of these artists within this cultural circulation. Throughout these painters, this type of image was no longer exclusive to the court and spread among the literati and the public. Ding Yunpeng’s work and the emergence of the three teachings theme on woodblock prints were evidence of this.

Undoubtedly, this themed image prospered in the Ming period, particularly during the mid-and late Ming Dynasty. This was firstly because of encouragement from the authority.

‘Although the three teachings have different ways and theories for living, they contribute (to people) with the same dream, and all of them are indispensable for today’s public. (三教之立，雖持身榮儉之不同，其所濟給之理一。然於斯世之愚人，於斯三教，有不可缺者)’ (Zhu Ming Dynasty, Volume 11)

The speech by Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (1328-1398), the founder of the Ming dynasty, underscores the ruler’s endorsement of the integration of the three teachings. Most Ming emperors were committed to fostering this synthesis, and Zhu Jianshen’s portrayal of a blended image of these teachings serves as further material evidence for this endeavor.

Turning to the academic environment, Wang Yangming’s philosophy of Zhi Liangzhi (致良知 Conscience) emerged from the integration of the three teachings during the Ming dynasty (He 2007, p.120) and had a profound impact on scholars. Wang asserted that he could draw upon both Buddhism and Taoism in his philosophical framework (Wang, Ming Dynasty, Volume 32). Furthermore, he advocated for the synthesis of these three teachings and their adaptable application, promoting coexistence rather than division among them (He 2007, p.120).

⁵ Yu Youxian (2011) mentioned that the colors of Ding’s three teachings-themed scroll painting were imitated from Qian Xuan 錢選 (1239-1299) coloring style, which used light, pale blue-and-green colors instead of conventional, magnificent pigments. Qian’s style was regarded as an expression of literati aesthetics (Song 2002, p.25); Ding used Qian’s style in his paintings, thus reflecting the impact of literati taste.

In addition, Ming dynasty monks and Taoists actively engaged in secular activities that fostered communication with the literati class by hosting discussions and even serving as assistants to government officials (Guo 1982, p.38). The cohabitation of Taoist monks and scholars naturally facilitated an exchange of ideas that is ultimately reflected in various artistic representations.

In conclusion, the development of the three teachings-themed paintings can be divided into two stages: before and after the Ming dynasty. In the first stage, this theme in paintings had a rigid hierarchy that respected Buddhism as the foremost of the three teachings, which was depicted through notions of coexistence. These paintings were supported mainly by rulers, and the literati did not participate in their transmission and promotion. In contrast, the literati class was the dominant sponsor of the three teachings-themed images in the Ming era, particularly in the mid and late Ming period. The amount of images with this theme rose quickly because of the encouragement of the literati class and other social elements. Therefore, the popular of this type of image reflected the development and transmission of the literati conception of integrating the three teachings.

Furthermore, it needs to be emphasized that although the images and relevant topic about the relationship among three teachings had been emerged in the late Tang and had highlighted by rulers in the Song dynasty. However, during the Ming dynasty, the relationship among the three teachings evolved from 'coexistence' to 'integration.' This shift indicates that they had a mutually influential and communicative interaction rather than merely existing alongside one another. This phenomenon can be attributed, firstly, to the utilization of the Ming ruler to all three doctrines rather than preferring Confucianism.⁶ Besides, the floating and communication among different strata and various identities of people, such as the fashion of associating between priests, monks, and intellectuals, undoubtedly accelerate the integration of their thinking unconsciously.

3. Analysis of the mid-and late Ming three teachings-themed images

As mentioned above, 'The Three Teachings' images and 'Three Laughers at Tiger Gorge' flourished in the mid-and late Ming. The literati attitude and role in integrating the three teachings at that time is worth analysing and recognising. This study therefore conducts an image analysis of the two types of image focusing on representative artists and their image layout, colour, stroke, and individual experience to recognize the literati attitude toward this theory.

(a) Analysis of 'The Three Teachings' images

Ding Yunpeng (1547-1628) and Chen Hongshou's (1598-1652) compositions are the only two existing pieces that provide the means to reveal, through iconology analysis and the connotations behind the images.

Initially, the painting below (Fig. 3), illustrated the representatives of the three teachings, Buddha, Confucius, and Laozi, which was created in Ding Yunpeng's later years.⁷ More precisely, its creation date can be narrowed down to between 1600 and 1605. This estimation follows the production of a woodblock print by Ding in 1588 titled 'Contain the Three to Be One' (函三爲一), which was included in an ink collection manual entitled *Fang Shi Mo Pu* (方氏墨譜) (Fig. 4). Additionally, another homonymous print was published in the subsequent ink manual *Cheng Shi Mo Yuan* (程氏墨苑) (Fig. 5) during the period from 1594 to 1605 (Shi 2009, p.9). The former print features a classical Confucian figure adorned with a headscarf as a representation of Confucianism, while the latter has been transformed into an image reminiscent of scroll paintings created by Ding, depicting Confucius wearing an official crown. Furthermore, upon re-evaluating the evolution of Ding's painting style from around 1600, we can confirm the approximate timeframe for these scroll paintings.

As the three phases of iconological interpretation proposed by Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968), the primary analysis is to discern foundational information from image presentation, which belongs to the stage of Pre-iconographic Description (Panofsky, 1939, p.5). Thus, we should confirm the figure's identity by understanding details before deeply analyzing the connotation of this artwork. Ding displayed a Buddha with the same hair and beard style in another artwork, 'Buddha Scroll' (Fig. 6), as the figure in this image. However, this foreign style for the figure's face was common in depicting the 'Bodhidharma' in the late Ming, usually with a red garment, curly hair, and a beard. Wu Bing 吴彬 (1550-1643), an artistic peer of Ding, created an image of Bodhidharma in a similar style (Fig. 7). At the same time, although Buddha also had a beard in the historical record (Ba, Eastern Jin Dynasty, Volume 3), which can be proven by the Northern Zhou Buddha statues (Fig. 10), his beard was sparse and short rather than bushy. Ding illustrated another Buddha figure without a beard (Fig. 11), similar to the Buddha's general impression in Chinese Buddhism after the Tang dynasty. Hence, both Buddha and Bodhidharma are possible figures in Ding's painting, but the former is more likely because the fact that Bodhidharma had 'green eyes and dark skin colour' (Ibid), which is different from Ding's image. The representative of Buddhism in this painting had a foreign style instead of the normal beardless image, which implies its secular, humanized tendency rather than the previously superior and inaccessible posture.

Turning to the Confucian figure, Ding illustrated Confucius with an unusual outfit of a crown and a scholar's garment, which was not present in earlier examples. The existing portraits of Confucius were generally of two types: 1. wearing a scholar's scarf and clothes, expressing Confucius's scholarly identity and refined quality (Fig. 12); 2. a uniquely Ming image with a crown and official clothes, expressing Confucius's identity as the Judge of the Lu Kingdom (Fig. 13), while at the same time wearing the scholar robe rather than the official garment, which made for subtle disharmonious details within the image, indicating the double identity of Confucius as both leader of Confucianism and an assistant to authority. Compared with the classical image of Confucius dressed in a scholar's robe, Ding's depiction of Confucius with this particular invention perhaps emphasizes his religious sacredness and official orthodoxy as well as harmony with the styles of the other two teachings.

⁶ Langlois and Sun (1983) posited that Zhu Yuanzhang was a syncretist, asserting that his lack of preference for Confucianism in public administration stemmed from his non-literati family background.

⁷ Ding created the painting 'Five Forms of Guanyin 五相觀音圖卷' (Fig. 8) at about 30 years old with a delicate style. However, there was a change after about 1600 with the strong line replacing the exquisite style (See Fig. 9). This was perhaps due to the impact of Ding's experience of making woodblock prints. 'The Three Teachings' image can be speculated to have been created at the same stage because of its similarity to the latter style.

Ding chose Laozi as the representative of Taoism in this painting, which followed the description of Ma Yuan's artwork and is different from the grotto on Miaogao Mountain, which used 'the very high lord (太上老君)' to replace the Laozi figure (see Fig. 14). As the record describes, Laozi is a form of the very high Lord and also a philosopher living in the Chunqiu period (Zhao 2019, p.120). Illustrating the three teachings image using a Laozi figure rather than the very high lord reflects the humanizing tendency of the three teachings paintings in the mid and Late Ming era. Ding thus displayed Laozi with a bald head and camel back to emphasize his feature of 'old age.'

The subtle distinction between the three religions remains in this painting, which should be further analyzed for its connotation and historical context to appreciate the painting. An analysis of the layout of the image shows Buddhism at the head of the three figures, occupying the most prominent area, which certainly indicates its supremacy. Confucius is on the left following closely behind, although, following the allusion of '*Confucius asking to salute Laozi*,' in which Confucius reveres Laozi as his teacher⁸. He was presented with a gesture of salutation to Laozi and was seated on the right side of the Buddha right⁹. Nevertheless, Ding showed Confucius above Laozi, which reflected a higher status than Laozi. Moreover, he narrowed the proportions of the Laozi figure in the image through a scattering perspective method to protect the display of Buddha. Laozi is pocket-sized and marginalized in this work, and therefore, has the lowest status in this three teachings image. Yu Youxian (2011, p.12) declared that the artist depicted figures with reverse perspective in order to display details of all figures, while it indeed was an expression of the traditional cavalier perspective in Chinese painting. Yu (2011, p.11) also mentioned that the triangular layout of the three representatives in the painting illustrates a sense of stability. Therefore, although we have proof of the subtle distinction of status among the three doctrines within this painting, it in fact depicts an idea of integration of the three teachings with all three sitting together simultaneously, instead of the unfair arrangement in Ma Yuan's artwork and the arrangement in a straight line with the Buddha positioned at the center in the anonymous artwork from the Southern Song dynasty, which indicates progress on the way to integrating the three teachings in the mid and late Ming.

The colour of clothing also confirms the different statuses of these figures in this painting. Buddha wore red according to the tradition of the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220) (Seng 2013, Volume 1), and the blue clothing worn by Confucius was the prescribed colour for scholars in the Ming Dynasty (Zhang 2015, 'Zhi' Volume 43), while the yellow-brown clothing of Laozi reflects the Taoist concept of colour that espouses simplicity (Wang 2006, p.97). The above colour arrangement for clothing reflects the figures' identity features rather than hierarchy. However, Buddhism emphasizes the need for Buddhist monks to wear 'badly coloured clothing, which includes green (green with black), black, and magnolia (red with black)' (Shi 2000, p.67). Therefore, the monk is not depicted with intensely positive reds. 'Red' had a special dignified meaning in the Ming Dynasty and could not be used in paintings at will. For example, the early Ming painter Dai Jin 戴進 (1388-1462) once painted a fisherman in red, which attracted questions from ministers because 'red' clothes were the symbol of the noble status of officers (He 2010, Volume 100). Ding illustrated the Buddha in red, recognizing the 'supremacy of Buddhism.' On the other hand, The Confucius figure shows a scholarly identity through the blue clothes, not only precise with his identity but also implies his status to be lower than red-clad Buddha, as it is known from the dress code of Ming officials that senior officials wore red court dress, and those of the fifth to the seventh rank wore cyan (Zhang 2015, Volume 43), thus showing that blue (cyan) position was second to red.

In essential, this three teaching images reflect support for the integration of the teachings, but with most respect given to Buddhism as it was produced for Buddhism, since Ding labelled himself as a believer in Buddhism with his signature. The scholar, Chen Jiru 陳繼儒, Ding's friend, inscribed the following alongside:

'Discussing Buddhism and Taoism beyond the doctrines themselves, this is a Yongmin family heirloom.' (談空空於釋部, 覆玄玄於道流, 此永民家傳也。右公題)

This sentence is from an article, '*Bei Shan Yi Wen* 北山移文' by an officer of the Northern Qi (550-577) Dynasty, Kong Zhigui 孔稚圭 (Wu 1959, Volume 7). It depicts a story about a hypocritical hermit who abandoned reclusion to serve the court, and thus expresses sarcasm for people chasing fame and fortune. The inscription is selected from a boast by the article's hero in which he claimed to be familiar with two teachings, reflecting a literati attitude toward them that both can be utilized by the scholar and as excuses for worshipping 'reclusion'. Although the name and identity are unknown, the owner may have been a member of the literati circle that was active in the late Ming period, led by Chen and Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555-1636), in which most members believed in Buddhism (Li 2012, p.165). Therefore, he invited Ding to paint Chen's painting and inscription and displayed it in the family Buddhist hall¹⁰. However, as Chen's inscription implies, the literati used both doctrines as a supplement to Confucianism. In their hearts, like the Confucian scholars in the '*Bei Shan Yi Wen*,' they did not ultimately transcend their original identity as 'Confucian scholars', whether they were indulging in Buddhism or Taoism, and adopted an attitude of using the two teachings for their benefit but based on Confucianism.

Notably, the inscription on this painting indicates that it is an heirloom of the Yongming family. This reminds us that during the Western Zhou (1046B.C.E.-771B.C.E.) dynasty, people commonly inscribed phrases such as 'It is used by offspring forever'¹¹. Given this similar expression, it is reasonable to suspect that this scroll painting was also related to the religious sacrifices practiced within this intellectual family. Consequently, Ding created these paintings with an almost balanced representation of the three doctrines, which provides insight into the literati's attitudes toward them. Furthermore, there has been a transformation in color from traditional forms of religious painting to more subdued and elegant hues that cater to literati aesthetics.

Besides, the three teachings-themed painting (Fig.16) by Chen Hongshou also reflected the literati thinking about integrating the three teachings. As an active artist of almost the same age as Ding, Chen had a complicated, double identity: a low-rank literati and believer in

⁸ 'Confucius asks rites for Laozi' (Fig. 15) is an allusion from the Grand Historian, which reflected the communication between the two teachings, and images with this theme were popular in the Han dynasty.

⁹ The Ming literati, He Liangjun, recorded that 'today people respected the left side more than the right side.' (He 1959, p.310).

¹⁰ A record inspired this idea that Cheng Dayue (1573) (a publisher) saw Wen Zhengming's painting, '*Image of Donglin Lotus Society*', in a literati family Buddha hall. It revealed the literati habit of constructing Buddha halls and displaying paintings inside.

¹¹ In the bronzes which were used in the sacrifice in Western Zhou dynasty were always had an inscriptions about memory of this event, or the function and reason about making this bronze, and the last sentence was 'It is used for offspring forever (子子孫孫永寶用)', such as the inscription in the bronze 'Zhugui (煮簋)', which to reflect the family inheritance and the ambition for immortality at that time.

Buddhism (Chen 2017, p.10). He was impacted by Buddhism profoundly due to his father, becoming a monk after he had failed the highest imperial examination a number of times and only gained the 'Zhusheng (諸生)' identity (Ibid). Thus, his mind was influenced by Buddhism and Confucianism, but there is no record of his belief in Taoism.

This painting is presented in a literati style with light colours and ink rather than religious artworks' strong blue and green. It is perhaps because they were produced before Chen's thirties when he passed the imperial examination, joined the 'gentry class,' and aspired to become an officer to contribute to society (Chen 2017, p.12). Besides, Chen created these figures with the faces of the three figures that are typically thin and elegant Chinese faces instead of the traditional exotic face. This amateur tendency in three teachings emerged with the literati's broad participation in integrating the three teachings. Not only were these images impacted by the literati aesthetic, but the religious worship function of these paintings thus had been weakened and perhaps changed to appreciation use.

(b) Analysis of 'Three Laughers at Tiger Gorge'

'Three Laughers at Tiger Gorge' is another type of three teachings-themed image favoured in the mid-and late Ming when it was presented by many famous amateur artists in the literati style.

The Three Laughter-themed painting created by Guo Xu (Fig.17) was arranged all three figures stand together with cheerful eyes and body contact. Their arrangement had changed to a stable and close triangle, instead of the linear array of Southern Song paintings with their clear status distinction. Also, although only half of Tao's body is shown in the image, his face was emphasized or magnified to reflect the three teachings more fairly.

However, as the representative of Buddhism, Huiyuan's figure was expressed in the artwork with a literati-style outfit, weakening his monastic characteristic. He wears a black scarf and white clothes with black edges, almost the same as Tao Yuanming behind him. Tao's head is covered with 'Fu jin (幅巾)' and he wears 'Shen yi (深衣)', which were the stipulated garments of scholars after the Song Dynasty (Tuo 1345, Zhi Volume 160). Huiyuan's scarf was subtly different from Tao's, with no lacing behind it. Monks were originally forbidden from wearing a scarf and cap (An, Han Dynasty, Volume 1). Baozhi 寶誌 (418B.C.-514B.C.) was the earliest monk who had a habit of wearing a cap, which was thus named the 'Zhigong Cap,' (Shi, Song Dynasty, Volume 29) (Fig. 18), similar to Huiyuan's scarf in Guo Xu's painting. Curiously, Huiyuan was Baozhi's senior, so it was not possible for Huiyuan to wear this kind of cap. Besides, Vimalakirti (Vimala-kīrti) was also decorated with a scarf (Fig.19). It is reasonable to depict him with a literati style because Vimalakirti was a secular Buddhist practitioner (Thurman 1991, p.20). This transformation of Huiyuan's image differed from that of the Southern Song period, which implies a literati stylization and secularization of the monk image.

This literary stylized expression can be traced back to the individual experience of Guo Xu. Although he was a court painter and followed the 'imperial court decorative' style in the early years (Wang 2021, p.64), and his motivation for creating this painting may thus stem from the prevailing notion of integrating the three teachings within the imperial court. On the other hand, Guo had the literati characteristic of refusing 'bigwigs' who asked for paintings and opportunities to paint in the court (Shen 2016, Volume 2, p.382). Furthermore, he got on well with Wang Yangming, and thus, Guo's painting was undoubtedly impacted by Wang's theory of a monk with an ambiguous outfit, shrouded in the literati style, and supporting the integration of the three teachings based on Confucianism.

Worth noticing, the work by a monk Dandang 擔當 (1593B.C.-1673B.C.) (Fig. 20) had a freehand brush stroke typical of the field of 'Zen (Chan) Painting (禪畫),' invented in the late Tang by Wangwei 王維 (Dai 2019, p.66). Zen painting was used to convey Buddhist theory without speech or words and to direct the inner heart. Its features were 'reducing stroke' and 'splashing ink' (Ibid).

In the painting, Tao Yuanming is the most notable figure, and only his front faces the other two teaching figures and the viewer. Tao is throwing his hand up and making a funny face at Huiyuan opposite him. Lu Xiujing back to the viewer entirely with a hand pointing to Tao and seems to talk to Huiyuan, which represents a bridge between Tao and Huiyuan. This implies the artist's attitude toward the three teachings, with Confucianism as the most significant doctrine of the three, and Buddhism as the foreigner always opposite to Confucianism and worried about communicating with Confucianism because of the latter's unclear attitude toward integration. However, Tao's expression implies his friendly but superior attitude in this communication. Taoism is a mediator of two teachings that promotes the integration of all three teachings, and stands in the middle of the three, conforming to the Taoist theory of maintaining harmony and inaction.

It is confusing for a Zen painting not to respect Buddhism as the foremost teaching. This is perhaps due to the complicated identity of Dandang. He studied Confucianism before becoming a monk and only indulged in painting and poetry after failing the imperial examination (Chen 1959, p.201). Therefore, he was profoundly influenced by Confucianism despite giving it up under the depressive social atmosphere and tremendous individual stress of that time (Ibid), which it was also common for the Late Ming literati to become monks and referred to as 'escape from Chan (逃禪)' (Ibid).

On the contrary, 'Buddhism was prosperous, and scholars did not talk about Chan after the Wanli period' (Chen 1959, p.129). Many monks made friends with the literati in the late Ming, like two of the four famous monks in the late Ming, Hanshan 寒山 (1546-1623) and Zibai 紫柏 (1543-1603), who were close to Dong Qichang and the literati circle around him (Dong, Ming Dynasty, Volume 4). Dandang, Dong's student and friendly with Dong's literati circle, maintained this relationship after becoming a monk (Gao 2016, p.6). This improved the communication between monks and literati promoted the development of the integration of the three teachings and the associated images displayed an increasing literati stylization and became popular among the literati.

In addition, Chen Hongshou's artwork (Fig. 21) displayed the late Ming tendency toward literati stylization and the integration of the three teachings. His painting showed Buddhism in an unimpressive position, its back toward the viewer, while the other two figures were shown from the front, particularly Lu, who seems to be the core of this image with almost the whole body displayed. There are no references that record Chen as having Taoist beliefs. Connected to Chen's art and other compositions, he studied in preparation for his exam, and painted to provide a livelihood throughout his life. This painting, therefore, may have been created for a sponsor with Taoist beliefs. For instance, 'Paintings of the Gaoshi Alchemist' (Fig. 22) by Chen depicted a scholar indulging in alchemy, a popular activity among late Ming literati (Zhang 2020, p.213). Chen's friend, Chen Jiru, was also obsessed with Taoism (Li 2012, p.165), which led Taoism to influence Chen.

Moreover, it is worth noting that the Confucian figure, as Chen depicted Tao with red clothes, which was rare in history. Perhaps this was to emphasize his significant status (see above). Tao's figure was in a plain and elegant style in other literati images, with white clothes and black scarf. Besides, he was thin and lithe, conforming to the hermit identity, which is also shown in Chen's other paintings (Fig. 23), rather than the dignified and graceful image of this painting. This rare expression combined the features of Confucius and perhaps extended this figure into an abstract symbol of Confucianism. Similarly, Lu Xiuqing's Taoist crown was replaced with a general Taoist scarf to display a more representative image.

Comparing these two themed images in the mid-and late Ming period, 'The Three Teachings' images are a more solemn type that developed from religious use, as paintings to be venerated in the setting of the temple or people's homes. These people, perhaps, were the literati and gentlemen who believed in Buddhism. The paintings, therefore, their figures with rigid, conservative expressions and body language, conformed to the demand for them as elements for shrines. The status of the figures in these paintings reflected the artists' attitudes. For example, Ding Yunpeng respected Buddhism, while Chen Hongshou regarded Confucianism as foremost among the three teachings. However, although many artists and literati followed Buddhism, the paintings show an improved status for Confucianism, compared with Ma Yuan's original image. This reveals an attitude among some literati of embracing the integration of the three teachings, while having a particular interest in Buddhism. However, this was developed on the basis of never giving up their awareness rooted in the study of Confucianism.

Besides this, the paintings were inclined to the secularized. This transformation revealed a connotation for these paintings beyond their original religious use. Perhaps, for the literati study of Confucianism, the three teachings figures were sages who were admired rather than gods and praised.

'Three Laughters at Tiger Gorge' images in the mid-and late Ming expressed the tendency to integrate the three teachings in the literati style. It is hard to distinguish the status arrangement among the three teachings from the images, as there was robust interactivity among the figures reflecting a harmonious relationship between them. This differed from the solemn atmosphere of 'The Three Teachings' images. The traditional enshrining function was therefore weakened, replaced by an appreciation and desire for collecting them among the literati, while retaining an educational function for conveying the integration of the three teachings.

Overall, both kinds of painting expressed some of the literati's attitude toward integrating the three teachings, insisting on Confucianism as a basis while absorbing the other two doctrines in order to refresh outdated and conservative Confucian ideas and to compensate for its shortcomings.

4. Transcendence: The emergence of three teachings-themed woodblock prints

Three teachings-themed images were not only popular in paper scroll painting but also in the form of woodblock prints, which broadened the audience and impacted the development of the idea of integrating the three teachings among the literati and wider society. This section discusses the three teachings woodblock prints, analyzes the relationship between the two materials, reveals the reasons for the emergence of these new images to explore the literati's role and impact during this process, and enters the tertiary level of iconological analysis about exploring the intrinsic reasons for the decline and integration of social classes behind the prosperity of three teaching-themed images.

Woodblock prints prospered as the publishing industry entered its prime in the late Ming (Park 2013, p.26), when books with delicate illustrations became wildly popular. 'There were almost no books without illustrations, and no illustrations were crude' (Zheng 2006, p.49). Publishers hoped to attract audiences through these delicate illustrations. 'Fang Shi Mo Pu', 'Cheng Shi Mo Yuan', and 'Gu Shi Manual (顧氏畫譜)' were among the early illustrated manuals that collected popular images for appreciation and commercial use. These images reflected the demands and aesthetics of the Ming people; thus, the woodblock prints of the three teachings in these books are discussed below.

'Cheng Shi Mo Yuan', published from about 1594 to 1605 (Shi 2009, p.9), was a catalogue of ink-stick motifs displaying their fantastic skills of the artists for the literati's appreciation. As the literati were the dominant customers for ink-stick images, the images collected in the manual were therefore based on literati favourites. Images were divided into six fields; volumes 9 and 10 collected Confucian images, while volumes 11 and 12, combined under the name 'Zi Huang (緇黃)', displayed images about Buddhism and Taoism. In general, the publisher gave Confucian images significantly more weight than the other two teachings, which was based on the publisher's own consideration of the three teachings and the prevalent tendency among the literati and public.

As mentioned in the previous phrase, Ding created the three teachings images for both businesses: the *Fang Shi Mo Pu* in earlier years in 1588 and *Cheng Shi Mo Yuan* subsequently from 1594 to 1605. The depiction of Confucius in the latter is similar to the three teachings images that he created on paper that they were suspected to be created in the similar time. Worth noting, the Buddha occupies the most conspicuous place with the largest size, stands alone in the left hand among the three figures in *Fang Shi Mo Pu*, both Confucius and Laozi show respectful expressions towards Buddha, their eyes looking at Him and their bodies leaning forward in the direction of Buddha, while Buddha made no eye contact with them and looked straight ahead. Turn to the *Cheng Shi Mo Yuan*, where the place of Buddha is replaced by Confucius. However, it differs from the former in that the three people have harmonious eye contact in this picture.

From the early print to the updated version in *Cheng Shi Mo Yuan* and scroll painting, it is obvious that the three teachings gradually tend to have almost equal status in that the figures stand together on almost the same level with the same size, no longer placing Buddhism highest or in the most significant space, with Confucianism and Taoism ordered after it. The Laozi figure has an average size, not a smaller one. Confucianism is shown slightly superior to the other two teachings in that Confucius stands alone on one side while the other two figures look toward him so that he seems to be at the center of the image. This reflects a transformation from 'worshiping Buddhism as supreme' to 'keeping balance among three doctrines but preferring Confucianism.' In fact, this early expression is perhaps due to Ding Yunpeng's devout Buddhist beliefs (Jin, 2004, p. 86), while the imperceptible rise in Confucius's status in both the scroll painting and print in *Cheng Shi Mo Yuan* was due to a specific requirement from a sponsor who was born into a Confucian educational background.

Another three teachings woodblock print in the *Gu Shi Manual* (Fig. 24) illustrated have a similar layout. The Buddha was depicted in the middle but looking at Confucius with a respectful gaze, revealing the invisible arrangement of the status of the three teachings again, while expressing the integration of the three teachings in general.

The woodblock prints reflected the literati attitude toward the integration of the three teachings in the late Ming through the following three aspects:

A) The participation of the literati in publishing

A notable phenomenon in these manuals was that amounts of the images collected could be found in paper-based paintings. It was because the publishers of these manuals were friends with the literati, who owned these masterpieces, and who had the images as woodblock prints. For many years, Gu Bing (顧炳) (unknown), the publisher of the *Gu Shi Manual*, followed the famous scholars who had rich collections. Whenever he saw these paintings, he kept this in mind and asked for copies (Gu 2003, Volume 2). This translation process reveals the literati's participation in these manuals, as they were willing to lend their treasures to others for copying and publishing. Furthermore, a group of celebrities and scholars even inscribed for it (Cheng, Ming Dynasty, Volume 3; Gu 1603, Volume 2) wrote introductions in the manuals. This phenomenon revealed the cooperation between publishers and literati and the widespread appreciation of woodblock print manuals among the latter.

B) The publishers were literati

Cheng Dayue 程大約(unknown), the publisher of Cheng Shi Mo Yuan, had studied Confucius in 'Taixue (太學)' and worked as a ninth class subordinate officer (Shi 2009, p.4). Although he eventually changed career to become an ink-maker, he was proud of his official experience, downplaying the ink-making industry and regretting dedicating himself to it:

'Ink is a production; making ink is a skill, I just felt ashamed about it...' (墨, 物也, 制墨, 工也, 餘方恥之.....) (Cheng, Ming Dynasty, Volume 3)

He was also a good writer and published an anthology of his own articles (Ibid). He made friends with scholars and even officers, and was admitted to the literati circle. Therefore, Cheng can be regarded as a literati.

Although not every publisher had experience of studying Confucianism like Cheng, most had frequent contact with the literati circle and were inevitably influenced by them. For example, Fang Yulu 方於魯 (unknown), editor of '*Fang Shi Mo Pu*', was friendly with the officer Wang Daokun 汪道昆 (1525-1593), considered a leading literary figure. Fang joined Wang's poetry society, 'Feng Gan' (豐幹社), and was admitted into the literati circle (Wang 2004, Volume 72). Therefore, most *Fang Shi Mo Pu* images were copied from Wang's collections, so, to some extent, Wang was the publisher behind the scenes.

C) Literati artists participated

Originally, woodblock prints were exclusively produced by artisans; however, this practice underwent a significant transformation during the late Ming dynasty when certain professional artists and even literati began to engage in this craft (Shin 2006, p.2). Notable figures from this period include the esteemed literati artist Ding Yunpeng, as well as Chen Hongshou and Xiao Yuncong 蕭雲從 (1596-1673)¹². This trend of literati participating in commercial production was closely associated with the decline and eventual collapse of intellectual strata, their integration with lower social classes, and even the identity swap with merchants. Woodblock prints emerged as a medium for disseminating literati ideas while simultaneously reflecting the interactions between literati and lower social strata.

The difference between the arrangement of figures presented in Ding's paper and woodblock versions of the three teachings images is confusing. The former displayed respect for Buddhism, while the woodblock prints did not. Indeed, paper-based painting was a unique method used only among the literati and was the sign of their noble identity (Qin 2020, p.34). The idea of respecting Buddhism in Ding's three teachings-image on paper matched the belief in Buddhism of the literati around him. Meanwhile, this is not the complete picture of the literati attitude toward the three teachings in the mid-and late Ming. He Zongmei (Ibid) concluded that there were two main kinds of thinking toward the three teachings at that time: 1. injecting Chan for Confucianism; 2. protecting Confucian orthodoxies and rejecting Buddhism and Chan. Ding and his literati friends who indulged in Buddhism and Taoism belonged to the former camp. However, their identity as Confucian scholars was the basis of their thinking, influencing their whole lives. Their study of Buddhism and Taoism was only a compensation for their Confucian thinking, as they supported the integration of the three teachings. On the other hand, when they spilled their hearts, they would sigh: 'Cutting hair off suddenly was not my mind' (Li 2022, Volume 2); and 'How can I be a monk? Just for living' (Chen 2017, p.19). Thus, it is not strange that when the literati allowed book merchants to copy and publish their collections to share with the public, their superiority as Confucian students promoted their defence of the Confucian authority that supported the integration of the three teachings, and even emphasised the foremost status of Confucianism. The difference between the paper-based painting and woodblock print images was not a conflict, as the latter could reflect the literati attitude toward the three teachings more widely because of their broad participation in the production process.

It is noteworthy that the literati class indeed exhibited a more conservative attitude towards the integration of the three teachings compared to both the ruling class and the citizens. This perspective can be illustrated by Ding Yunpeng's design for a decorative painting related to the ink business, as previously mentioned. This motif features represent figures from the three teachings arranged within a

¹² Xiao Yuncong was a 'vice-Gongsheng' in 1639 (Hu 1960, p.51). Ding Yunpeng's painting style included a literati style that was quaint and elegant.

circular formation, which evokes comparisons with another image themed on the three teachings created by Ming Emperor Zhu Jianshen himself, titled '*A Harmonious Image*' (Fig. 2). That particular work presents an unusual composition that combines representations of Buddha, Confucius, and Laozi. It reflects the ruler's ambition to promote integration among these traditions while gaining popularity among the public. Over a century later, it became a classic motif in New Year paintings and used to convey blessings for well-being (Fig.25).

In contrast, while Ding's design is described as '*Contain the Three to Be One*,' it primarily illustrates these figures as they coexist rather than achieving a genuine integration similar to that found in '*A Harmonious Image*' and its derivative New Year paintings. This distinction highlights the intellectual considerations and class standards of scholars within the broader context of integrating diverse teachings and social strata.

As in the above analysis, this participation of literati has a significant reason for the emergence of three teachings-themed woodblock prints. Art compositions were commercialized in the 16th century and served the prestige of their owners (Craig 1991, pp.116-165.), and were a unique object that belonged to the literati class. In contrast, woodblock prints were cheap, and the public consumed goods that could be copied over and over and spread everywhere in the form of book illustrations (Qin 2020, p.34). Therefore, the prevalence of these manuals and woodblock prints threatened the authority of the upper-class aesthetic in artworks, breaking their monopoly status regarding images (Park 2008, p.37). So, now the query is: Why were the literati willing to lend their collections to publishers and cooperate with their work? This section tries to navigate this problem in the following sections.

Artisans and merchants belonged to the lowest two classes in feudal China, which changed in the Ming period because of the active commercialization of society (Ibid). Wang Yangming supported the four classes of industry, shi (scholar 士), nong (farmer 農), gong (artisan 工), and shang (merchant 商) having equal status and contributing equally to society (Wang, Ming Dynasty, Volume 25). Besides, Huang Zongxi, the late Ming scholar, mentioned that 'both worker and merchant are the base for society.' (工商皆本) (Huang 2011, Volume 11). It revealed the transformation in the status of the four industries and the new attitude of the literati toward artisans and merchants. Moreover, the Ming authorities encouraged the sons of merchants to participate in the imperial examination (Elman 2013, p.39). This initiative allowed merchant descendants to attain official positions, which inevitably elevated the status of their families within the merchant class and disrupted the conservative atmosphere prevalent in official circles. Consequently, this shift also had a reciprocal effect on the merchant class itself. Following this, the status of artisans and merchants improved, with some literati willing to get close with them and writing articles praising their excellent skills. For instance, the regional literati leader Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道 (1568-1610) compared the literati and celebrities with the craftsmen and concluded that the fame of the former is quickly gone, but the latter will be immortal (Yuan 2002, Volume 20). It was rare for craftsmen's 'skill' and status to surpass that of the literati and their works in the historical record.

Because of the appealing benefits of trade and encouragement from Wang Yangming's theory, the high-ranking literati or scholar-officials, who were disdainful of merchants, began to gradually participate in the commercial trades from the late Ming period. As Wang Dao Kun recorded, 'There are seven or eight out of ten men of letters in business in a county (Wang, Ming Dynasty, Volume 29). The communications between the two classes promoted the merchants' understanding of the high-ranking literati.

In fact, the essential reason for the emergence of the literati began to communicate with the merchants due to the force of reality of livelihood. As the saying in the preface of '*Cheng Shi Mo Yuan*' by the scholar Guan Zhidao 管志道 (1536-1608) :

'Today's scholars think: 'Dao' is a high pursuit, and learning skills is a common pursuit. Thus, Confucius discussed study and support, dedicating himself to the pursuit of 'Dao' and wondering about studying skills, while the study of skills also belongs to 'Dao', so that pursuing the top 'Dao' needs skills.' (今儒者類曰：道成而上，藝成而下，云爾乃孔子論學，志於道而遊於藝，然藝亦道中物也，故道至於禦天立極，必傳藝) (Cheng, Ming Dynasty, Volume 2)

'Dao' was a whole-life pursuit for Confucian students and included the ambitions to pursue individual perfect quality and to build harmony and unity in society (Wong 2012, p.67). Passing the imperial examination to become an officer was the long-term ambition of every Confucian student because promoting harmonious development in society is one of the significant items in pursuing 'Dao' and can only be accomplished by being an officer. Guan cited the sentence above to express his admiration for the craftsman's excellent skills and to expose the dilemma of many literati careers in the late Ming. If people passed the examination, they could enter the high-ranking literati and officer class, i.e. 'Shidafu (士大夫),' (See Chart. 4) and gain noble status in society. This meant they had finished part of the 'Dao' dream. Otherwise, it was meant to be a low-ranking literatus, 'Shi (士),' or even dropping down to be a merchant or craftsman within the low social class.

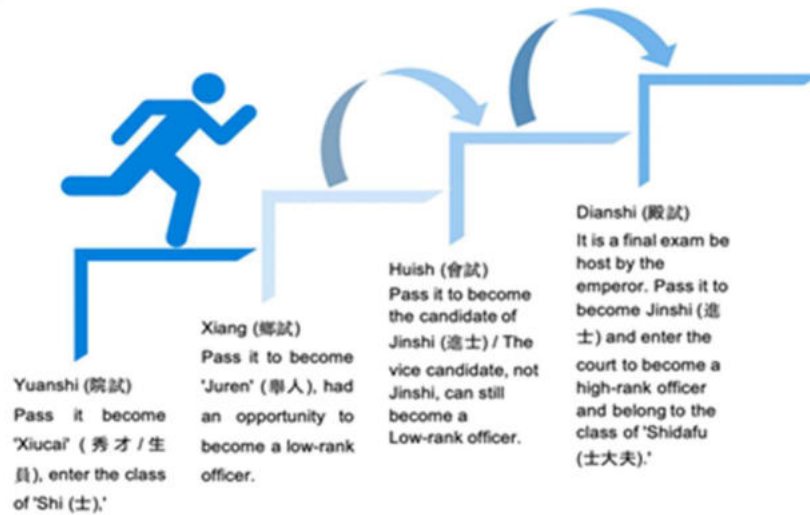


Chart 4. The process of the Imperial examination.[Source of chart: the author]

Regretfully, not everyone could pursue ‘Dao’ successfully. The distinction among literati was decided by the imperial examination (Xu 2006, p.11). It was a hierarchical examination, (See above chart. 4) and those who passed it could become ‘literati,’ holding public distinction and prestige (Ibid). However, these stable classes broke down because of the huge number of members in the late Ming¹³, which led to brutal competition with many literati failing the highest examination, and the boundaries between the literati and the other classes began to blur. Many students moved to other industries for their livelihoods. Chen Hongshou, Cheng Dayue, and Chen Jiru were examples of this, only passing the lowest examination, becoming ‘*Xiucai*’ and entering the ‘*Shi*’ class. Failing the higher examination meant not entering the higher ranking official-scholar class. Giving up on the upper way, some students even reduced their identities to become woodblock print designers, merchants, and citizens (Ibid, p.20).

The lowest-ranking literati served as a crucial bridge and subtle connection between the higher literati and the merchants, as well as the artisans, who belonged to the lower social class. Advanced ideas from the upper literati were conveyed to the public and influenced by the lower literati, and vice versa. Notably, some painters had experiences serving within the court; thus, it is plausible that their knowledge and perspectives were shaped in this environment before being transmitted to the intellectual class. Ultimately, these ideas would be disseminated to the public by this same intellectual class. Woodblock prints emerged as a significant medium within this chain of dissemination.

According to the division of forms of capital and the definition of Cultural capital connotation by Pierre Bourdieu (1986)¹⁴, the burgeoning late Ming merchant class occupied most of the economic capital in the society and less cultural capital due to their poor education level. On the other hand, the class of the Official-gentry declined because of surplus membership, and the ‘institutionalized cultural capital’ no longer belonged to them. Catching the economic capital by participating in commercial activities with merchants and inputting their aesthetic conception to the public class was the way for them to maintain their dominant status during the transformation of society. This ambition was precise with the pursuit of the burgeoning merchants’ class. The latter hoped to gain more cultural capital in the society-decorating themselves by acquiring art collections similar to these gentlemen or officers and following their aesthetics to gather recognition in the cultural field. The translation of the three teachings-themed from the paper paintings to the woodblock prints was an example.

This class’s communication and member mobility led to an ambiguous boundary between the gentry class and the public. The literati class included those who passed the metropolitan examination to become scholar-officers, the failed Confucian students who scattered into every industry, and the merchants who pursued a literati lifestyle. They all contributed to the dissemination of the idea of integrating the three teachings through paintings and woodblock prints. This transmission of elite culture to the public was due to the loss of traditional gentry class status but conveyed their aesthetic and conception to the public class that the latter would thus be subjected to them in the cultural field forever. As Wilensky spoke (Wilensky 1964, p.175), the high-class taste was not declined but became more widely available.

5. Conclusion

The three teachings-themed images reflected the development of the conditions for the literati participation and attitude towards the idea of integrating the three teachings in the mid-late Ming period. Firstly, it is clearly shown that production of these images peaked in the mid-/late Ming period, implying the development of a parallel conception, namely the integration of the three teachings, which developed to a peak simultaneously. Moreover, the Ming literati were the predominant sponsors of the three teachings-themed image and

¹³ Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613-1682) concluded that the ‘total amount of students was no less than half a million’ (Gu, Ming Dynasty, Volume 1).

¹⁴ Pierre Bourdieu (1986) coined the term ‘cultural capital’ and divided it into ‘embodied state,’ i.e., an individual’s level of literacy; ‘objectified state,’ i.e., the possession of tangible material things such as collections of paintings; and institutionalized state, such as the academic qualifications.

also promoted the conception of integration. Rather than only discussing the idea, as in the Song Dynasty, their promotion included devoting themselves to producing the images, for example Chen Hongshou and Dandang, and having other artists create them. The literati attitude can also be demonstrated to have changed from their original 'scepticism' for, and disagreement with the idea of integrating the three teachings to positive encouragement in the mid-and late Ming. This was for complicated reasons: 1. support from the authority; 2. the emergence and prevalence in the literati circle of Yangming's philosophical theory supporting this conception; 3. changed social environment that improved communication between the Confucian-influenced literati and believers of Taoism and Buddhism.

From analysis of a series of images in terms of layout, colours, strokes and styles, there are two dominant types. It is clear that the mid-late Ming literati supported the integration of the three teachings and their equal status. However, most believed in Buddhism more profoundly than they did in Taoism, which was subtly reflected in the images. The use of these images had transformed from a Buddhist and pure religious use into one for the appreciation and education of the literati in the late Ming, resulting in them becoming more and more secular and endowed with the literati aesthetic.

The further analysis of the three teachings-themed woodblock prints has helped to build a more reliable and broader recognition of literati attitudes. This art form drew more literati participation in the production process allowing the more general literati attitude to be gathered from its analysis. The emergence of the three teachings images on woodblock prints also revealed the literati communication with the lowest class of society, which further answers the question of the prevalence of images with this theme at that time. The above transformation of the images' function and expression was based on the massive transformation in the social ranks, which led to a decline in the superiority of the literati class and the rise of merchants and artisans. High-rank literati maintained their status by exchanging their cultural material with the merchants, and the low-ranking literati were devoted to these low-ranking industries for their livelihood. Both were disappointed with the significant social change, with their spirit depending on all three doctrines for salvation. The teachings of Buddhism and Taoism emerged as responses to the limitations of Confucianism in addressing individual spiritual perspectives in historical contexts. However, they still insisted on the Confucianism-oriented mindset in their inner mind.

Undoubtedly, the literati were the lynchpin in this stage of the integration movement, researching only their role has been worthwhile. However, in broader society, integrating the three teachings also relied on the support of the court and the public. Therefore, further exploration from the perspectives of all three ranks, along with wider recognition of the significance of integrating the three teachings in Chinese society and philosophy, can be built upon in the future.

Author Contribution

Yitong Wu is currently pursuing a Master of Research in International Studies at Macquarie University, Australia. She holds a Master's degree in Archaeology and the History of Asian Art from SOAS, University of London, and a Bachelor's degree in Chinese Painting from the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts. Her primary research interest lies in the visual representation of social hierarchies in the context of the integration of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism during the Ming dynasty.

As the sole author, she was responsible for the conceptualization, literature review, collection and interpretation of visual materials, and the full drafting and revision of the manuscript. This study reflects her ongoing inquiry into how traditional doctrines shape human cultural experience.

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Competing Interest declaration

The author declare that, to their knowledge, they have no financial, personal, or professional relationships that could be construed as a potential competing interest regarding the work described in this manuscript.

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Images list



Fig.1 Anonymity. *Three Laughters at Tiger Gorge*, Southern Song Dynasty. Ink and colour on silk, 47.6x26.4cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.
[Source of Image: <https://digitalarchive.npm.gov.tw/Painting/Content?pid=5379&Dept=P>.]



Fig.2 (Left side) Zhu Jianshen (1447-1487), *A Harmonious Picture*, 1464, Ink and colour on paper, 36x48.7cm, Palace Museum, Beijing.

[Source of Image:

<https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E4%B8%80%E5%9B%A2%E5%92%8C%E6%B0%94#/media/File:%E4%B8%80%E5%9C%98%E5%92%8C%E6%B0%A3.jpg>]

Fig.3 (Left side) Ding Yunpeng (1547-1628), *The Three Teachings Image* (三教圖), The Ming Dynasty, Ink and colour on paper, 55.7x115.6cm, Palace Museum, Beijing.

[Source of Image: <https://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/paint/228151.html>.]



Fig.4 (Left side) Ding Yunpeng (1547-1628), *Han San Wei Yi (Contain the Three to Be One)* (函三為一), Ming Dynasty, Woodblock print, Published in *Fang Shi Mo Pu* (方氏墨譜).

[Source of Image: http://www.360doc.com/content/21/0127/15/52920_959210773.shtml.]

Fig.5 (Right side) Ding Yunpeng (1547-1628), *Han San Wei Yi (Contain the Three to Be One)*(函三為一), Ming Dynasty, Woodblock print, Published in *Cheng Shi Mo Yuan*(程氏墨苑).

[Source of Image: <http://www.gmzm.org/?gujitushu/chengshimoyuan.html>.]



Fig.6 (Left side) Ding Yunpeng (1547-1628), *Buddha Scroll*, 1604, Ink and colour on paper, 146x58cm, Hu Nan Museum, Changsha.

[Source of Image: <https://www.hnmuseum.com/en/gallery/node/5832/24>.]

Fig.7 (Right side) Wu Bing (1550-1643), *Dharma Scroll* (達摩圖軸), The Ming Dynasty, Ink and colour on paper, 53.1x118.8cm, Palace Museum, Beijing.

[Source of Image: <https://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/paint/232865.html>.]



Fig. 8 Ding Yunpeng (1547-1628). *Five Form of Guanyin* (五相觀音圖卷), 1579-1580, Ink and colour on paper, 28.58x134.62cm, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas.

[Source of Image: <https://art.nelson-atkins.org/objects/20645/five-forms-of-guanyin>.]



(A part of image)



Fig. 9 Ding Yunpeng (1547-1628), *Ding Yunpeng painting of Yinzen Image* (丁雲鵬畫應真像), 1613, Ink on paper, 141.4x66cm, National Palace Museum, Taipei.

[Source of Image: <https://theme.npm.edu.tw/opendata/DigitImageSets.aspx?sNo=04016384>.]

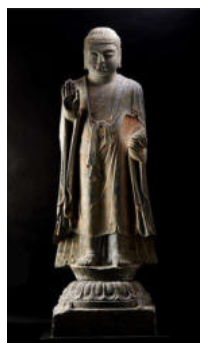


Fig.10 Anonymity, *Standing Buddha Statue*, Northern Zhou Dynasty (557-581), Excavated in Wanzi Village, Baqiao District, Xi'an Province in 2004, Xi'an Peilin Museum, Xi'an.

[Source of Image: <http://www.beilin-museum.com/index.php?m=home&c=View&a=index&aid=2555>.]



Fig. 11 Ding Yunpeng (1547-1628), *Painting of Buddha* (畫釋迦牟尼佛), 1606-1613, Ink on paper, 156.8x53.1cm, National Palace Museum, Taipei.
[Source of image, e.g. Style Transformed: A Special Exhibition of Works by Five Late Ming Artists p 102.,etc]



Fig.12 (Left side) Anonymity, *Confucius Portrait of Daily Living* (孔子燕居像), The Ming Dynasty, Ink and colour on silk, 126x102.5cm, Kongzi Museum, Qufu.

[Source of Image: <http://www.kzbwg.cn/digitized/3dww/848.html>.]

Fig.13 (Right side) Anonymity, *The Image of Confucius as Sikou of Lu Kingdom*. (孔子為魯司寇像), 1648, Ink and colour on paper, 146.5x66.5cm, Shandong Museum, Jinan.

[Source of Image: <https://wh.cnki.net/collection/detail/36141>.]



Fig.14 Anonymity. *No.2 cave of Integration of the Three Teachings of Dazu Stong Carving* (大足石刻妙高山 2 號石窟-三教合一), The Southern Song Dynasty, Chongqing.

[Source of Image: http://www.sxlib.org.cn/dfzy/sxfjwhzybk/sxhcfjzplswl/lsg/201701/t20170122_612678.html.]



Fig. 15 Anonymity, *The Holy Signs - Asking the Rites of Laozi* (聖蹟圖·問禮老聃), Ming Dynasty, Ink and colour on silk, 33x1cm, Confucius Museum, Qufu.
[Source of Image: <http://www.kzbwg.cn/zhanlan/jbcl/life/ww/2020-06-11/1206.html>.]



Fig.16 (Left side) Chen Hongshou (1598-1652), *The Three Teachings Image* (三教圖), 1705, Ink and colour on paper, 130.2X45.7cm, Wu Xi Museum, Wuxi.
[Source of Image: <http://www.fineart-china.com/htmlopusCN/cn/painting-03569.html>.]

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[Source of image: <https://auction.artron.net/paimai-art5009760669>.]



Fig.18 (Left side) Anonymity, *Baozhi Portrait* (寶誌像), Woodblock Prints from a book 'Portraits of Patriarchs' (佛祖道影), (Shi Xuyun, 2016. Revised Portraits of Patriarchs. Zhonghua Book.)
[Source of Image: <http://www.fengxintang.com/fxzt/bzcs/>.]

Fig.19 (Right side) Anonymity (Li Gonglin style), *Portrait of Vimalakirti* (維摩居士像), The Song Dynasty, Ink on silk, 91.5x51.3cm, Kyoto National Museum, Kyoto.
[Source of Image: https://syuweb.kyohaku.go.jp/ibmuseum_public/index.php?app=shiryo&mode=detail&list_id=3643380&data_id=828.]



Fig.20 (Left side) Dandang (1593-1673), Three Laughters Image (三笑圖), The Ming Dynast, Ink on paper, 122x53cm, 1997 Beijing Hanhai Auction Limited Company.

[Source of Image: <https://auction.artron.net/paimai-art09030102/>.]

Fig.21 (Right side) Chen Hongshou (1598-1652), *Three Laughters at Tiger Gorge* (三笑圖), The Ming Dynasty, Ink and colour on paper, 101.5x50.5cm. 2009 China Guardian.

[Source of Image: <https://auction.artron.net/paimai-art61301577/>.]



Fig.22 (Left side) Chen hongshou (1598-1652), Painting of the Gao Shi alchemy (高士煉丹圖), The Ming Dynasty, Ink and colour on paper, 173.5x86.5cm, 2015 China Guardian.

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Fig.23 (Right side) Chen Hongshou(1598-1652), *Portrait of Tao Yuanming* (陶淵明像), Ming Dynasty.

Ink and colour on silk, 30.2x26.7cm, The Cleveland Museum of art, Cleveland.

[Source of Image: <https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1979.27.1.5>.]



Fig. 24 (Left side) Gu Bing (Ming Dynasty), *The Three Teachings Image* (三教圖), 1607, Woodblock print, Published in *Gu Shi Manual*.

[Source of Image: <http://www.izhsh.com.cn/doc/10/2107.html>.]

Fig. 25 (Right side) Anonymity, *Harmony brings good fortune* (和氣致祥), Qing (清) dynasty, New Year woodblock print, 49x38cm, Chongqing China Three Gorges Museum, Chongqing.

[Source of Image: <https://baike.baidu.com/item/清湖南滩头和氣致祥年画/56869450>.]